



Iowa's Multilingual Emergency Response Network

By Loren Bawn and Colin R. Peterson

Communities of all sizes throughout the U.S. have become increasingly diverse due to immigration, refugee relocation, educational opportunities, and the expansion of overseas businesses into local markets, among many other factors. This has resulted in a steady demand for language services. (The U.S. Department of Labor projects a growth of 24% from 2006 to 2016 in employment for interpreters and translators.¹)

While these demographic trends bring numerous opportunities for growth and learning, they can also present challenges. One of the biggest challenges facing states with increasing limited-English-speaking populations is providing equal access to programs and services at all levels. Communication barriers can lead to misunderstandings and to the marginalization of entire groups of people within their adopted communities. In this environment, the underlying foundation of a strong community—shared interests and identity—can be damaged. In some instances, such as emergency preparedness, a state's ability to communicate effectively with its limited-English-speaking population can mean the difference between life and death.

In this capacity, professional interpreters have a unique opportunity (some would say responsibility) to get involved and use their expert knowledge of languages and cultures to help

bridge the linguistic and cultural divide to get valuable information out to all those in need. By volunteering their skills within their own neighborhoods,

cept for IDHRC was developed at the request of the Iowa Emergency Management Association. IDHRC's mission is to "coordinate a holistic

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interpreters are making an invaluable contribution toward building understanding and cultural respect.

The following article details the efforts the State of Iowa has put forth to harness the talent of the professional language community in order to reach out to its various ethnic groups. By identifying qualified personnel to deliver potentially life-saving information, the state is also helping to strengthen its communities through its volunteers.

Reaching Out

The Iowa Disaster Human Resource Council (IDHRC) brings together representatives from interfaith, voluntary, and governmental organizations that are active in disaster services for the purpose of fostering a more effective response and recovery in times of disaster. The con-

approach to disaster recovery by maximizing public and private resources, thereby providing an efficient system that can address the immediate and long-term physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of impacted citizens.² To help meet its goals, IDHRC formed a special needs committee responsible for developing a plan to strengthen Iowa's capacity to meet the disaster preparedness and response needs of Iowans with limited English proficiency. This resulted in the formation of the Multilingual Emergency Response Network (MLERN).

The two principal agencies involved in the creation of MLERN's task force are the Iowa Council for International Understanding (ICIU) and the State of Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services. ICIU is a nonprofit organization based in Des Moines that facilitates exchange and education programs in addition to

providing professional interpreting and translation services in Iowa. Since 1975, the Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services has been working with the U.S. Department of State to assist refugees from other countries escape persecution and resettle in the United States. Through a wide array of services, the bureau helps refugees and communities adapt to the challenges they are facing.

MLERN Volunteers

Volunteers play a crucial role in Iowa's disaster response plan, supplementing the efforts of emergency responders who provide immediate relief and care to individuals and communities following a disaster. MLERN's initiative asks leaders of Iowa's many ethnic communities to serve as "ambassadors" for the project. The goal of the ambassador program is to encourage bilingual (or multilingual) members of the community to serve as volunteers. Ambassadors learn more about MLERN, provide input to the project's ongoing planning efforts, and share MLERN's vision with others in their communities. Once volunteers are identified, their contact information and language skills are entered into a database that MLERN officials can access in times of crisis. Volunteers will be contacted as needed to assist in providing emergency information to community members. Through MLERN's program, volunteers can participate, at no cost, in training sessions to help them better respond to disaster/emergency events. Volunteers can also act as interpreters for trained emergency responders as needed. Iowa's network currently includes speakers of Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish, and more languages are being added all the time.

Juan C. Cadenillas, an ambassador with the program, sums up MLERN's mission this way:

"Emergency situations do not discriminate. Everyone in the community could be affected, including limited-English-speaking residents. As a person involved in public health, as well as an immigrant from Peru, I feel that it is my responsi-

important to embrace this diversity so all citizens can be a part of the emergency management system from planning to recovery."

Swallow Yan, executive director of the Chinese Association of Iowa and

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bility to use my communication and bilingual skills to provide a community service that could save lives and/or facilitate the access to services after a disaster. Being a volunteer for MLERN is a great opportunity to serve and to motivate others to apply their skills for the well-being of the community."

Joyce Flinn, IDHRC coordinator for the Iowa Department of Homeland Security, says:

"Volunteers are involved and committed to their community. They know their neighbors. Volunteers are a resource to emergency management, whether they are involved in the day-to-day planning that must be done or are providing important services during events. Volunteers are part of the community that is working to recover after an event occurs. Multilingual volunteers will provide a critical service by helping to bridge an identified language gap. As Iowa becomes more diverse, it is

an MLERN ambassador, says, "Volunteers make our history and remake our community."

What's in It for Interpreters?

Why are people compelled to volunteer? What will volunteer interpreters gain from offering their expert skill set free of charge to emergency response personnel? Most people consider volunteer work to be a selfless act that may make these questions seem inappropriate. However, as Robert Coles explains in his book, *The Call of Service*, volunteerism engenders legitimate rewards and satisfaction and adds crucial value to the time an individual spends volunteering. Coles focuses on five main types of rewards volunteers gain from their service: accomplishing a task and reaching people; moral purpose; personal affirmation; stoic endurance; and boosting professional success.³ Iowa's MLERN program provides volunteers with all of these rewards.

Accomplishing a task and reaching people: MLERN volunteers ➡

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Iowa's Multilingual Emergency Response Network Continued

know that their work interpreting for emergency response personnel will be fulfilling in terms of accomplishment as well as rewarding through reaching people in need. Regardless of cultural identity and language skills, people impacted by disasters are at a very vulnerable time in their lives. The volunteer interpreter not only helps people get potentially life-saving information and resources, she or he creates a bridge between cultural groups by offering assistance that is blind to language proficiency and cultural heritage.

Moral purpose: Oftentimes individuals are compelled to undertake volunteer work out of a sense of moral purpose. Following large-scale disasters, there is often an outpouring of compassion, donations, and empathy for those who have been impacted. Through their vol-

Stoic endurance: Stoic endurance as a satisfaction gained from volunteerism can be a little tougher to grasp. The idea is that those who have experienced a number of personal challenges in their own lives may feel compelled to undertake volunteer work in order to help those with even greater needs. This helps volunteers to place their own challenges into perspective. Many interpreters know the challenges firsthand of living in a

which can lead to future paid work in other settings. The volunteer work of MLERN interpreters also builds visibility for the importance of the interpreting and translation industry. From working firsthand with professional interpreters, emergency response personnel will see how critical it is to have information that is complete and accurate.

Leading the Effort

MLERN's task force is a part of ICIU's mission to build cultural respect at home and around the world, one person at a time. Helping Iowans with limited English proficiency prepare for and respond to emergency situations is an important community service as well as an outlet for ICIU interpreters to give back to their communities.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Labor—Bureau of Labor Statistics (January 23, 2008), www.bls.gov/oco/ocos175.htm#outlook.
2. Iowa Disaster Human Resources Council, www.iowahomelandsecurity.org/asp/programs/idhrc.asp.
3. Coles, Robert. *The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism* (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1993), 68-94.

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untary efforts, MLERN interpreters show that they value community and the right of individuals to have equal access to emergency services and information.

Personal affirmation: MLERN interpreters volunteer their time with a strong sense that what they are doing is important. In an emergency event, they can see that their professional skill set has an impact and value far beyond themselves, thus making them feel a part of something bigger.

place where the dominant language is not their own. They can empathize with the experiences of the individuals they are helping, and find in that a desire to give of themselves.

Boosting professional success: Finally, MLERN interpreters may be compelled to volunteer because it is a service that will ultimately add value to their professional résumés. Through their work engaging with emergency response personnel, they are able to build upon their professional contacts,